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Lesbian's talk may lead to lawsuit

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BOSTON — When a high school teacher told her social studies class she was a lesbian, one student was so upset she was forced to transfer to a private school, the teen-ager's parents claim.

Jeannine and Thomas Jenei are seeking \$359,571 from the town of Brookline — including \$300,000 for emotional distress — saying their daughter Johanna was denied her right to a public education.

"Johanna is a young woman who believes in God and believes in Jesus Christ as her savior," said the Jeneis' lawyer, Randal Fritz. "She was just completely overwhelmed by people bringing their sexual ... and political agendas into the school."

Town officials say there is no merit to the family's claim for damages, made in a so-called demand letter that often is a preliminary to a lawsuit.

Fritz said teacher Polly Atwood announced her sexual orientation at Brookline High three years ago after being interviewed on television about a state bill to protect the rights of gay students.

Johanna, a 14-year-old freshman at the time, is now enrolled at Lexington Christian Academy. Her parents are both public school teachers in Cambridge.

The Jeneis claim school officials refused their request to set up an independent study course for their daughter with another teacher and threatened to withhold credit if Johanna did not remain in Atwood's class.

"The school should do what its own policy books say it should — respect students' differences, including differences of faith," Fritz said.

Schools Superintendent James Walsh said the school offered a number of alternatives, including another teacher or another social studies course.

Atwood could not immediately be reached for comment Tuesday; she was in class.

